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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001621

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS
USPACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EFIN](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: FORMER DETAINEE--TURNED-CABINET MINISTER
ASSERTS GAYOOM ACTING IN "GOOD FAITH"

REF: A. COLOMBO 1530
[B](#). COLOMBO 1556

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a September 6 meeting with the DCM in Colombo, Maldivian Foreign Minister Dr. Ahmed Shaheed and Finance Minister Qasim Ibrahim each asserted their strong belief in President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's commitment to democratic reform, citing several recent positive developments, such as the decision to register political parties, as proof. Foreign Minister Shaheed reported that the Government will urge the Special Majlis to adopt a "roadmap" to reform but sidestepped the question of whether the roadmap would include a timetable. With the appointment of Qasim, who spent several months in solitary confinement after the August 12-14 unrest in 2004, the Government is eager to show Gayoom is bringing "reform-minded" people into his inner circle. End summary.

OUT OF THE PRISON CELL;
INTO THE CABINET

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a September 6 meeting with the DCM in Colombo, Maldivian Foreign Minister Dr. Ahmed Shaheed and Finance Minister Qasim Ibrahim each asserted their strong belief in President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's commitment to democratic reform. Qasim, who was previously affiliated with the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and spent several months in solitary confinement on Dhoonidhoo Island following the August 12-14 demonstrations in 2004, was accompanied by former fellow Dhoonidhoo inmate and MDP sympathizer Mohamed Naseem, now Executive Director of the Ministry of Finance. Shaheed noted that Gayoom's recent appointments of new Ministers had brought a "reform-minded group" into the Cabinet who "have the determination to bring the political party process forward."

[1](#)3. (C) After thanking the Ministers for their government's expression of condolence and offer of assistance for the victims of Hurricane Katrina (Ref B), the DCM asked about the situation in Maldives following the demonstrations of August 12-14 this year and subsequent detentions of numerous protesters and opposition activists (Ref A). Qasim noted that even during his extended detention last year on Dhoonidhoo, he nonetheless remained convinced of President Gayoom's commitment to reform. "I said I was sure he'd take the (reform) agenda forward; now he has done so," the new Finance Minister declared, citing the June 2 decision to register political parties, expanded freedom of press, and recent changes to the Cabinet (including his own appointment) as evidence of Gayoom's "good faith" efforts to move ahead. The August 12-14 detentions this year following the MDP demonstrations were necessary, he indicated; "otherwise, we'd have chaos." In an aside, he observed that multi-party democracy "costs a lot," adding that now "the Government has to please more people."

FOREIGN MINISTER CITES PROGRESS;
ACKNOWLEDGES CONTINUED DETENTIONS

[1](#)4. (C) FM Shaheed reported that "40 or so detainees" remain in custody, of which 25 may have had previous convictions for various offenses, including narcotics possession. The remainder, according to Shaheed, were either involved in the protests August 12-14 or have been identified as "ringleaders" inciting the unrest--even if they did not actually participate in the demonstrations. (Note: We know of at least one detainee who was not even in Male' on August 12-14 but who has nonetheless been dubbed a "ringleader." End note.) The Foreign Minister then enumerated several

positive developments since the August 12-14 unrest. In addition to the August 19 visit by an ICRC delegation, a representative from the International Committee of Jurists had attended the August 24 arraignment of MDP Chairman Mohamed Nasheed (Ref B), Shaheed noted, while a recent joint Canadian-EU "fact-finding mission" had been allowed to visit detainees and reported finding the treatment of detainees improved from last year. In addition, the Government may sign the Optional Protocol Against Torture during the United Nations General Assembly this month, Shaheed said.

15. (C) Despite the disturbances of the previous month, the Foreign Minister continued, the Government gave the MDP permission to resume public meetings as long as no loudspeakers were used. After the MDP flouted this restriction, however, the Government was forced once more to call on September 5 a two-week moratorium on such gatherings. (Note: The Government lifted the moratorium the following day. End note.) Shaheed expressed concern that some members of the MDP would use the September 19 death anniversary of two inmates during a 2003 prison uprising as a pretext for creating fresh disturbances. However, "by and large, the MDP is trying to distance itself from violence," Shaheed emphasized. To encourage non-violent political debate, the Attorney General has invited representatives from all parties for a dialogue on proposed reform, the Foreign Minister reported. "The Government is trying to provide an outlet" for discontent other than street protests, he added.

ROADMAP--BUT NO TIMETABLE

16. (C) The DCM asked the Ministers if they were satisfied with the pace of reform so far. Acknowledging that the Special Majlis had not moved expeditiously to enact reform, Shaheed said, "However fast we go, there will be problems because of the magnitude of the changes we're trying to make." After the Special Majlis reconvenes on October 1, the Government will propose a "roadmap" to reform that will include key benchmarks, such as electoral reform, voter education, judicial reform, presidential term limits and revisions to the penal code. When asked whether a timeframe, however notional, would be attached to the roadmap, Shaheed responded that the Government would "list out the tasks to be done in some kind of sequence," but cannot dictate a timetable independent of the Special Majlis. Special Majlis deliberations on the proposed reforms should be complete within one year, Shaheed predicted, but cautioned that actual "implementation would have to be phased in" more gradually. "We can't speed up reform at the expense of debate." (Comment: Apparently debate cannot be speeded up either. The Special Majlis has been debating rules of procedure--never mind any actual reforms--for more than a year. End comment.) Given the numerous fundamental changes still pending, Shaheed commented, "we can't think of holding (presidential) elections until we know what we're voting for. . . . We have to make sure we have sufficient mechanisms in place" to resolve the disputes that will inevitably arise in the course of the first multi-party election. In light of these constraints, Shaheed said, presidential elections are unlikely to be held before 2008.

COMMENT

17. (C) A year ago at this time, Qasim was in solitary confinement on Dhoonidhoo (and, during two of our visits to him and Naseem, exhibiting signs of mental stress), and the Government was preparing sedition charges against him. Now he is the premier member of a "reform-minded group" in the Cabinet that the Government hopes will convince the international community that Gayoom's commitment to reform--although sometimes derailed by periodic arrests of opposition figures--remains constant. While many recent steps, like the registration of political parties and the expansion of the Cabinet, indeed suggest that the Government is on the right track, Gayoom will have to overcome his default response to opposition--arresting the "ringleaders" and charging them with sedition--before true reform can occur. While we appreciate that the Government cannot pre-empt the work of the Special Majlis by imposing time limits on the "roadmap," adopting some kind of prospective timeframe for proposed reforms to be enacted could bolster public confidence in Gayoom's sincerity. DCM and Econchief will have an opportunity to review the situation more closely during their visit to Maldives September 14-15
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